



## 141. Developing a New Generation of Environmental Stewards with Megan Karch

**Megan Karch:** [00:00:00] As somebody, when I was younger, I actually didn't do well in school when I was in my younger years, and to hear that from a kid, to gain confidence in themselves, they'll go back to the classroom, it'll make a difference.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:00:13] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation and your host. We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all, but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

So, for today's episode, we have the opportunity to go back outside. Specifically, we're headed to the Pacific Northwest, and we're going to be talking about a place, a program, and, I believe, a whole ecosystem that is embodied under the heading of something called Island Wood, which is an environmental education nonprofit that believes that there are many paths to creating a more sustainable and equitable world, which is why they offer a variety of immersive programs throughout the Seattle region to help children, educators, and community members deepen their understanding of the world around them.

They explore important environmental issues and see the power that they have to make positive impact in local communities and in the planet—or on the planet, I should say, Maybe in the planet, too, we'll get into that in just a minute. And joining us to share the

amazing work of Island Wood is Megan Karch, who is the CEO of Island Wood since 2018. So, Megan, welcome to the program.

**Megan Karch:** [00:01:46] Thank you. Thank you for having me.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:01:48] We're very excited to have you. As our listeners know, we do a lot about environmental and outdoor education, and firmly, firmly believe at the PAST Foundation, and certainly, on this program that getting kids outside, hands on, in the muck, in the world is one of the best opportunities that we can give kids to learn stuff. So, give us the sort of 100-foot view, if you will, first and foremost, about Island Wood, because it's not just a program, it's a place, and it's an experience, and it's in one of the most beautiful places in the world, quite frankly. So, share with us just a little bit about the sort of high level, about what this thing is and why it came to be.

**Megan Karch:** [00:02:33] Yeah. Well, thank you. Thank you for having me. And we agree, we think the Pacific Northwest is a fabulous place. And Island Wood is really designed to inspire the next generation of environmental stewards and really inspire the next generation of individuals that will make a difference in this world. And we do that through the outdoors. We do that through education. And Island Wood is at the nexus of what I would call education, environment, and social justice. At the nexus of those three is really where our work shines.

And what we do is we provide experiences for youth, we want to provide them that sense of curiosity, sense of discovery, take what they're learning in the classroom and make it real for them in the world that they live in. And then, what we want to do is we want to walk beside teachers, and partner with teachers and educators, and really give them the tools that they need to take what kids are learning in the classroom and make it real for them in the worlds that they live in.

So, it's really through two ways. One is providing the experiences for youth and the second is we think we can have a very exponential impact if we're working with educators, because those educators are the ones that really have the time, and that are working with kids all year, and we believe we have a much greater exponential impact in that way. So, that's, at a high level, kind of what we do.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:03:54] Yeah. And we totally agree with you about that that work, as it relates to those teachers, so absolutely.

**Megan Karch:** [00:04:00] Yeah. And teachers, as we all know, especially right now, but always, they have one of the hardest jobs, they have one of the most important jobs, and especially in the last two years, I think they need more partners than ever.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:04:14] Yeah, I agree. Absolutely. One of the things that I alluded to early in our conversation here was that Island Wood is not just a program, but it's also a place. So, let's dig in just a little bit to the place, because place matters. We know that place matters, but we don't all have an Island Wood, but let's start there anyway and recognize that there is a place that also contributes to the bigger, broader work that you do in the community. So, share with our listeners just a little bit about that, because the pictures are absolutely amazing, and I swear, one of these days, kind of come and pay you in a full visit.

**Megan Karch:** [00:04:51] Yes. Well, please do, because it is an amazing place. We think about place in two ways. One is, for sure, the campus that we are on. Our main campus is on an area called Bainbridge Island. It's a 255-acre campus. It was going to go up for development a little over 20 years ago. It's actually an old lumber mill that was here for very many years, and was actually saved for the purpose of exactly what we're doing now, which is to inspire the next generation of environmental stewards.

So, our main campus is here on Bainbridge Island. We also have a campus over in the wooden villa area that's part of King County, which is a little bit different, where we provide day programs. But then, what I would say about place is place is central to our teaching, but places where you are. So, what we teach about is, okay, well, let's talk about the history of where we are now here on this campus, this 255-acre campus, who was here first? What was the culture? Who was here throughout?

But then, we think about place in terms of, well, where are kids living? Where are they going to school? Where are they playing? And what we teach is really about place where kids are. We believe nature is not only on our gorgeous campus or up in the mountains, but nature and science is everywhere. And what's really critical is to teach

kids, hey, what you're experiencing here on this campus, you also can take some of these things to where you live, where you go to school, and where you play.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:06:18] Absolutely. And that's the key component, and I think here is just helping everybody understand that no matter where you are, you can actually do some amazing work around environmental and outdoor education. And it's not just education that's about the outdoors or the environment. That's the other thing that I was really intrigued by about Island Wood, and that's where sort of that nexus that you mentioned with the social justice piece, I was super, super excited to see that. So, share a little bit more with our listeners about that, because I do believe that that is a key component that other places are anxious, and willing, and open to figuring out how to bring into their own work. So, how is it that Island Wood thinks about that?

**Megan Karch:** [00:07:07] Well, so what I would say is it's critical to our work and what I would also say is we're consistently on a journey of learning. And so, the work is critically important for a number of reasons. First, if you think about it, we're never going to inspire the next generation of environmental stewards, the next generation of problem solvers, the next generation of those who are going to change the world without actually putting social justice at the center.

And so, for us, that has been a critical part of our work, but we also, if you look at the history of the environmental field, and we, as an organization, we are historically White-led, the environmental field overall has been historically White-led, which also has not great history in it. And it's important for us to take a look at it, understand it, and see how we can bring everybody in, in particular, really looking at racial equity at the center.

And so, it's why it's critical to our work, it's critical to our teaching. And we look at it in all aspects from what we're doing in our organization to create system change, but also, then what does that look like in the curriculum we teach? How are we involving the communities we serve? What changes are we making at the nexus of, as I mentioned, environment education?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:08:33] Yeah, absolutely. I love that. Can you give our listeners an example, a concrete example, of the way that you've incorporated that entire philosophy into an actual lesson, or activity, or experience?

**Megan Karch:** [00:08:44] Yeah. So, we'll start with one example. So, as part of our program, we have a graduate program. So, we do both in-service teaching and pre-service teaching. So, we work with pre-educators, getting them ready to teach, and then we also work with teachers in the classroom. In our graduate program in particular, we center social justice as a part of the Environmental Learning Program that they're going through.

And so, in every single piece of the curriculum, you're interweaving it. So, it's not kind of this one subject on its own, it's helping our educators think about where do they come from, how do they understand more about themselves, so when they're thinking about their teaching practices and when they're thinking about the curriculum, that they're coming at that, that they have a full understanding of their own history, and their own thinking, and where they came from.

And as they do that, they can become better at really putting racial equity at the center. So, the examples I would put is our curriculum has shifted tremendously in the last five years especially. And really, we've looked at every single part of the curriculum when somebody is coming to our master's program of how we're doing that teaching and how are we teaching them as educators to think about their own identities as they're teaching, would be one example.

We're involved in a research program in partnership with the University of Rochester and the University of Connecticut. And over the next two years, we're actually going to use our graduate program as a place to kind of learn and iterate on these various pieces of identity, teaching educators more about their own identities, so that we actually are—how are we shifting and changing the tools, the practices, and how we teach?

And so, what we'll do over the next two years, as an example, because our graduate program is set up working in partnership with our experiences program, every week, our graduates are teaching new students. And so, they teach a number of classes all year long, and they can always iterate and change, and iterate and change, and iterate and change. So, that would be one example over the next two years that we're working.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:11:09] Oh, no, go ahead.

**Megan Karch:** [00:11:10] No. Well, I would just say that over the last five years, we've looked at all aspects of our curriculum. And what I would say is it's still not good enough, we're always going to have to shift, and change, and learn as a learning organization and as an organization that we know we don't have all the answers. We're not even close to having them all.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:11:32] Exactly. And I love that, because the world is changing. It's not static, right? So, we have to. And any time you encounter a program, a school, take your pick, how you want to put labels you want to put on it, and if they tell you, well, we've got this figured out, those are those alarm bells, right? Because the reality is the world is changing every second of every moment of every day, and we have to be willing and open to recognizing that what we're doing, even if it's awesome, wonderful, and great, tomorrow, we might need to be able to tweak it, modify it just to fit whatever is happening in the moment in the world.

And that's certainly one of the things that we advocate for very much. So, I love that aspect. I also want to just dig in just a little bit more, because I love the way that you've crafted this opportunity, a graduate program, so it's not just that you're working with teachers, it's not just that you're working in the community and working with kids, but you're actually utilizing the collective set of assets and resources that you have tied to Island Wood to have a truly impactful moment, I guess, if you will, on that next generation or iteration of teachers looking to sort of expand their practice.

So, share with us, I assume that this is embedded program, if you will, in partnership with a post-secondary that already existed. So, you, Island Wood, didn't go through, but I could be wrong, because every once in a while, I encounter programs like this, they go through the entire accreditation program themselves, which is an epic lift. So, share with our listeners just a little bit about how you structured the graduate program component, because I know there's a lot of interest about this out in the world. And then, the follow-up question to that, so I'll just roll them all into one, so you can tackle it, is folks are going to be listening and saying, hey, I want to do that, but I don't live there, is it possible? Because I always get that question follow up as well.

**Megan Karch:** [00:13:24] Well, great question. So, no, we didn't go get our accreditation. What we do is we partner, our partner is the University of Washington. So, what happens is our graduate students come to get their master's in education. We provide 10 months of that, and then they finish that up at the University of Washington. So, it's in true collaboration and partnership with the University of Washington. They come to our campus first.

So, what happens is they come to our campus and they live here for 10 months. We have a graduate campus here on our campus, that they live on the campus, they live in their own units, and they spend 10 months with us, where we have faculty that are teaching classes, and then they are getting a practicum learning experience. So, they are learning how to teach, and then they're going literally out into the fields with classes that are coming onto our campus, practicing what they've learned, and then at the end of the week, saying, okay, what worked, what didn't work, and, okay, what's going to be the learning plan the next time you're back out there? What can you learn that you can take back out?

And what we love about it is it takes theory to practice. And it's a constant. It's not theory for 12 months, and then practice. It's theory, practice, theory, practice, theory, practice. So, you can constantly iterate and constantly learn as a future educator. And so, that's how it's set up. And so, graduates come, we typically—so this year, we have 32 graduates on our campus. They live with us. And then, they will go over to the University of Washington to finish their degree. And then, they can choose. Are they going to go into the classroom, into the formal classroom, or are they going to go into the informal classroom? And we believe in both.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:15:07] Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, what an amazing program. I mean, I'm super jealous. If I were back out there hunting for graduate programs to go to, that would be at the top of my list. To be able to live on Bainbridge for 10 months, to be completely immersed in something that you love and you're studying, I can't imagine a better way to be able to do that. That's fabulous. And again, I'm super jealous.

**Megan Karch:** [00:15:33] Well, thank you. I would have come in my earlier years as well. It's a great experience. It's a strong community experience.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:15:42] Yeah, I would imagine.

**Megan Karch:** [00:15:43] Yeah. They're close now.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:15:44] I would imagine. Alright. So, now that we understand how that piece of your ecosystem works, so share with us a little bit about the specific work that you're doing or the experience that a student may have when they come either individual or come through their school and school-led groups. And I'm really, really curious about not just the activities or the experience the individual students have, but either the pre or the post sort of follow-up experience, or the ways, the extensions that teachers hopefully, that's part of what they're gaining there, that they take back into sort of the everyday experience for their students. What does that look like?

**Megan Karch:** [00:16:21] Sure. Well, we work with students and schools in what I would call two different ways. One is having schools and students come and spend about a week with us here on campus. The other is we go to them and we go to their schoolyards. And so, there are two different experiences that they can receive. And then, another is kind of a day program out at our other facility. And here's where they're all similar.

They're all similar, in that we're first talking to teachers about what are they learning in their classes to make sure that our curriculum is aligned to what they're learning, when they're learning it, so that we can take the concepts that they're learning, and make them real, and make them real to the world that they're in. And so, that work happens with both our graduate students and our staff reaching out to the schools, connecting with the teachers, connecting with them on the timing when they're coming, and how do we align the curriculum to work.

So, whether they're coming for four days, whether they're coming for a day, or whether we're going to their schoolyard, the whole point is to not to have a one-off experience, but to completely tie it in to what they're learning in the classroom, so that the classroom comes alive for them. So, that's that piece. And then, if they're coming from our four-day program, it really is very intentional to create an experience that feels magical.

**Megan Karch:** [00:17:44] I mean, I remember once when I first arrived, I said, "This is magical", and a staff member said, "Megan, there is nothing magical about what we do. We're scientists." And I said, "Okay. Yeah, I totally get that." And we do things with such intention, the point is to create that feeling of magic. And the point is to create that sense of wonder, that sense of discovery.

And so, what will happen in those four days? It's everything from, literally, when they get off the bus, we have planned the campus so that the kids walk through the woods and they don't see one building before they see the lodge. And it was very intentional. Every single building and every single thing that was built was done through the eyes of a child. And so, the lodge itself was built with input from kids. Every single bed has a window looking right out to the woods.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:18:39] Oh, that's awesome.

**Megan Karch:** [00:18:40] And I give you that kind of detail because that intention is really critical to the curriculum then that our graduate students are working on with the kids. And it's everything from teaching about science and teaching about nature to teaching about culture, to teaching about place, to teaching about, how do you work together as a team and collaboratively, and how do you take in different viewpoints and different opinions, et cetera?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:19:06] Excellent. I love everything about it. Can you give us an example of some specific lessons or activities? Because I know that in addition to a lot of teachers and administrators that listen to the program, we have a lot of community members as well. And I always love to sort of plant some seeds about how they can think about the assets they have in their community, in which they could go out and say, hey, I can't do this, but I just heard Megan talking about this and we have this partner over here that I know does X, maybe I could convince them to partner with us, so we could do something creative.

**Megan Karch:** [00:19:37] Yeah. Well, I'll give you the lesson that kind of goes through all of our curriculum, which is really taking the science concepts of, what's your hypothesis? What is the evidence? How good is your evidence? And really walking students through that, and then giving them a very specific task for that. So, if they're on

our campus, it may be, what's your hypothesis about why those leaves are green? What's your hypothesis about why X, Y, or Z is happening?

Oh, you just talked about that on the trail. Let's talk about the hypothesis, the evidence, the quality of the evidence. And so, we will take what they're learning in class and just make it real for them. Now, when we're in schoolyards, what we're doing is taking concepts around engineering and around real problems that are happening. So, for example, let's talk about wastewater or stormwater. Let's talk stormwater. Stormwater, what we do is we have already built out, we have all of the surrounding demographics in their neighborhood, we know where all the pipes are, the drains are, et cetera, we bring them all to the class, they solve a real problem about a puddle or they solve a real problem about something in their play yard.

And what you're doing is you're taking the concepts that they're learning in school, but then making it real for them like, oh, wow, we could actually solve that, or we help them build a rain garden, and what is it solving in their neighborhood? So, there are a variety of different curriculums, and some of the curriculums are teaching our teachers, our educators, really partnering them, giving them curriculum, so that they're doing it with their kids, and some of it, we're literally going into the school and doing it with their kids.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:21:29] Yeah, absolutely. That's spectacular. And I could imagine that has really, really broad appeal when you think about the different sort of school environments that you could possibly go into, and how different they look, and how very, very tailored you could absolutely make that. I love that. I would imagine that when you went to Island Wood, there were a few surprises to you, beyond the fact that, apparently, science can't be magical.

Although I'm going to vote with you, Megan, because I believe science is nothing but magical, but we're probably biased. But I am very, very curious about the, as you first sort of immersed yourself there, what were some of the things that surprised you from that sort of educator sort of standpoint that you saw happening there? Because the true magic, I suspect, of the place is watching the kids just go, oh, my gosh, right?

**Megan Karch:** [00:22:22] Yeah. Well, let's see, was it a surprise or was it just kind of a, wow, this is even more exciting than I even realized? I think that happened for me.

When I first arrived, I wanted to immerse myself in the programs, to really see through the eyes of the kids. And especially on our overnight program, I remember, you know how staff kind of say, hey, I want you to grow here, here, here, and here.

And I said, well, that's great, but actually, I'd like to participate from the day they get off the bus to the day they get back on the bus, all the way through. I want to see it through the eyes of the kids. And I think I don't know if it was a surprise as much as it was just validation for myself about the importance of the work, is to watch the kids. So, there was one kid in particular. I remember when he got off the bus, and he got off the bus, and he was a little grumbly.

He was like [making sounds] and he had to carry a sleeping bag, and he had to carry this cart through the woods. And I was walking beside him and there was a little bit of complaints. And then, I happened to be on the trails with him often. And the first day, he was kind of participating, not really, but he really was not happy. He was like, "My mom made me come. My teachers made me come."

At the end of the program, we have a part of the program at the end, which is a closing program around the fire, it's a really amazing experience, and the kids put on skits, but the skits have a lot to do with what they've learned through the week. This kid put on a song talking about the impact it made for him, and how he hopes he can come back, and I mean, the talent and the lessons that he learned, and what I saw was just the shift.

And it's not just him. I mean, I see it in so many kids, but to see that shift where you see the I'm not sure why I'm here to not only I see why I'm here, but—I remember I listened to one kid who I happened to be sitting at the pond, and they were walking by, and they said, "In the classroom, I don't feel smart. Here, I feel smart." And that, to me, is where it's like, okay, as somebody, when I was younger, I actually didn't do well in school when I was in my younger years, and to hear that from a kid, to gain confidence in themselves, they'll go back to the classroom, it'll make a difference.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:24:58] It will make a difference. And in fact, I would argue, because I've had those similar experiences with kids, and that is when you know the power of what's happening. And that's the magic, right?

**Megan Karch:** [00:25:10] Yeah.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:25:10] And I don't know about you, and certainly, in our programs at PAST, we have kids very much the same, your story, I can so identify with it, because I've been with those kids that show up the first day, "My mom made me come. My teacher made me come", whatever. And then, by the time you get to the end of the week, not only are they fully immersed, but they're somehow leading. They've emerged from whatever their shell happens to be. And the other thing that we find about programs like this, and I assume that you see the same thing is there are a fair number of kids who are not that traditional sort of learner and they don't excel in a traditional setting.

And the minute you put them in some place else, that they do find their way, and it's an incredible experience for everybody involved. And we have kids who are hesitant at the beginning, who then will sign themselves up for the next week or the next program, right? And then, their parents will show up, "Guess what, I signed up for next week". And you can imagine what those internal conversations are like, but it's a fabulous problem to have,, because that kid is so engaged and you changed that life, Megan, forever. I would think that's the magic.

**Megan Karch:** [00:26:24] It is those moments that make a difference. And you had asked earlier about kind of the pre and the post, we do, do—I mean as I mentioned, we do a lot with the teachers ahead of time. We then actually ask the teachers and the kids right when they're ending, but then we ask three months later and six months later, because what we want to know is, okay, that feel good, how much wears off and how much actually sticks with them, and that's important to us. But I will say, anecdotally, that we hear often from people years after they've been here what they felt. And it's that feeling that makes the difference, I think, in their learning in the future, is if you can create that sense of confidence.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:27:10] Oh, I completely agree with you. And I think that all the science in the world and the data, and it does, in fact, back that up, but intuitively, you know it, because you can feel it in the moment. And again, when you have those conversations with those kiddos years later, it is incredibly meaningful. And every once

in a while, I'll bump up against a kiddo that we had in the program early. They've all graduated. They've gone to college. Many of them are in jobs.

And every once in a while, I hear them talking about or something will pop up in social media and they'll respond to it, oh, my gosh, I remember doing X, Y, or Z, and it was so amazing, many, many years later, because it does stick with them and that's fabulous. I always like to close the program recognizing that people are listening sort of from all over the world with a whole collective set of different experiences. And so, what is next? What is Island Wood's next thing or something that you're getting excited about in terms of the work that you're doing, that one last thing you'd like to share with the world?

**Megan Karch:** [00:28:15] Sure. Well, what we're really excited about is, how do we provide access to more individuals, more kids and more educators? In particular, while the pandemic was extremely hard on our organization, as well as everybody throughout the world, my philosophy has been, don't let a crisis go to waste. And I think we learned a ton, and what we've learned is we can provide access to educators that are farther away from us. We can do it virtually.

Yes, we believe in the outdoors, we believe in the experiences, but you can actually provide tools and practices, and that is something that we really tested during the pandemic, and plan on expanding, and really getting out to areas where kids are not getting those resources and educators are not getting those resources. So, really, that's one of the biggest pieces. And then, to couple that is really our work on advocacy and making sure that every kid before they graduate has this experience, every single child. And so, we've been working on that in Washington State and we'll be working on that nationally.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:29:24] That's a fabulous endeavor and I wish you nothing but great success with that, because I would agree with you, it's incredibly important and transformative, both for students, for their families, and for communities. And at the end of the day, because I get this question all the time as an archaeologist, are you in the business of creating a bunch of archaeologists? And the answer is no. What I am in the business is creating an entire generation of stewards, right? And if we immerse folks in the opportunity to understand what that is, what the science of this particular thing

happens to be, they will be advocates for their lifetimes. And that's the thing we need as much as anything else.

**Megan Karch:** [00:30:02] That's right. Absolutely. If we can create a strong sense of curiosity, a strong sense of discovery, a strong sense of action, we will create environmental stewards for the future.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:30:14] We will and we're in desperate need of them. As we stand back and look at what's happening to our planet, the moment is here more than ever before, so I would agree with that.

**Megan Karch:** [00:30:27] Absolutely.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:30:28] So, Megan, thank you so very much for making time to have a conversation with us to share the amazing work that's happening at Island Wood. And we will be posting resources and I hope that our listeners reach out to you, because I cannot imagine a greater learning partner than Island Wood and the work that's happening there. So, thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

**Megan Karch:** [00:30:49] Oh, thank you so much. I'm so honored and I look forward to hosting you on our campus sometime soon.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:30:54] I am so coming to visit you.

**Megan Karch:** [00:30:58] Alright. Thank you so much.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:31:00] Alright. Thank you.

**Megan Karch:** [00:31:02] Alright. Bye-bye.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:31:04] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media at Annalies Corbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.